'If You Build It, Will They Come?'

Educational Decision-Making in the Context of Economic Uncertainty and Social Risk

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1 Introduction

This paper is based on a research project[1] that investigates issues relating to the achievement of the goal of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in India. A central question of the research is: to what extent do education programmes reflect and, therefore, address localised or beneficiaries' understandings of the constraints and possibilities shaping educational access and attainment? UPE is defined here as not just getting all children to school, but keeping them there for the duration of primary school and ensuring that they achieve minimum standards of education. The type of schooling that is reviewed in this paper refers to the formal government primary day schools which function on the basis of a fixed curriculum, norms for retention/promotion, and a system of examinations[2].

Policy decisions about the investment of resources in the education sector have been tied to assessments of the links between education and productivity, either directly, through the enhancement of cognitive capacities and skills, or indirectly through the enhancement of individual well-being. 'Returns' to education have been computed to assess the benefits that accrue to individuals (private returns), and to societies at large (social returns). These returns have been assessed as both income returns as well as welfare enhancing returns, particularly in terms of facilitating greater control over fertility, better health, and an overall improvement in standards of living. Private and social returns both are projected to be high, assuming a complementarity of interests in household and national investment in education. In particular, private returns to primary education are projected as high, as most states offer free primary education services (Colclough 1993: 26) and the World Bank

[1] This is research for a PhD thesis provisionally entitled 'Innovations in Social Policy and Bureaucratic Practice: the Case of Primary Education in India'. The paper is based on preliminary fieldwork and hence the findings are necessarily speculative at this stage.

[2] The collective body of policy interventions in education includes provisions for non-formal/night schools. However, those are seen largely by planners as temporary or 'safety-net' measures while the greatest value is placed on getting children to full-time schools. There are a whole set of issues relating to this which is about the creation of modern 'disciplining' institutions for children, replicating Western models of education. These are not explored here.

has used such evidence from India as the basis for funding an extensive programme for the expansion and improvement of primary schooling in several districts of the country.

The evidence of 'returns' used by the Bank has been critiqued on several grounds including the methodological flaws of the economic models used to derive the rates which assume perfect market conditions and omit other important variables (see Colclough 1993) so that the projections for private economic returns may be higher than those experienced by households, particularly where credit and labour markets are 'imperfect'. The projection of non-income private returns may also be over-enthusiastic particularly in contexts where 'the relationship between private income and the quality of life is far from rigid' (Drèze and Saran 1995: 184), and where the translation of income into welfare inputs depends on social and cultural factors. In fact, in the Indian context, the continuing high rates of discontinuation of schooling, poor achievement levels, large gaps in access to education by gender, caste and class beg the question: if private returns are so high, why does the educational behaviour of poorer households not reflect this?

Investigating the intangible, invisible and often circumstantially determined factors that shape household decision-making may help to shed light on the continuing problem of getting poor children, particularly girls, to school and ensuring that they stay there. This paper reviews evidence from interviews with parents to try and illuminate the factors that influence education decision-making – not just what decisions parents make, but why and how these decisions play out in the context of the broader livelihoods and lives of poor households. While many of these issues have been discussed extensively in the broader literature on education (Colclough 1993; Drèze and Sen 1996; Drèze and Saran 1995; Acharya 1994), a 'participatory dialogue' based on the direct accounts of men and women (Kabeer 1995) is critical to develop understandings of the relationship between people and education in different situations, particularly in the context of mass and standardised schooling systems.

This paper chalks out two areas for discussion: (i) it argues the case for understanding educational decisions of poor households as part of dynamic and fluid responses to changing and uncertain material circumstances, rather than as one-time decisions (ii) it suggests that these decisions are embedded in broader ways of thinking about the differential value of girls and boys, which in turn determine the scope for flexibility in household management of livelihoods. Because gender ideologies are embedded in household responses, the discussion in this paper considers both the question of getting all children to school as well as reasons for the observed gender differentials in schooling, pointing to the complex intertwining of social and economic factors in determining household decision-making about children's education in the context of poverty.

2 The Research Area, Questions and Methods

The fieldwork (ongoing) which forms the basis of this paper was carried out in January and February 1997 in three villages in a northern district of Karnataka. The district is drought-prone, although pockets have been irrigated through canal projects. The interviews reported in this paper were conducted in Village H located in a dry block, which is considered to be the most backward of the district, economically as well as socially. The average literacy rate in the block is less than 30 per cent. This compares unfavourably with the data for the state and the country. In 1987–88, literacy rates for children in the age group 10–14 were 74 per cent for males and 56 per cent for females in Karnataka, slightly higher than the average for the country as a whole (73 per cent for males and 52 per cent for females)[3].

Agriculture is the main livelihood, as there are few alternatives in the form of heavy or agro-based industries. Employment opportunities are largely restricted to government jobs or agriculture. In agriculture, landed farmers engage in cultivation, while marginal landowners and wage labourers[4] usually employ a combination of livelihood strategies including subsistence cultivation on their own

[3] State and country data are taken from Drèze and Saran (1995: 198).

[4] Marginal landowners were landowners who owned between 1–5 acres, which was often unproductive because of the irrigation problems in the area; wage labourers were generally those who owned no agricultural land.

land if any, wage labour, and migration. There is one agricultural season in the non-irrigated areas, and during the non-peak season there is widespread migration to irrigated areas of the district or the state between January and June. Livestock-rearing is a key strategy to tide people over in times of hardship. Goats are bred by many households for rearing and sale, and oxen are a vital contribution to the earning capacity of landless wage labourers. Children play a key role in the organisation of household labour and livelihood strategies, though the nature of their contribution varies depending on their age, gender and the overall availability of labour in the household.

Village H is a roadside village, with a population of about 1,200 people, and a school that dates back to the 1950s, though its modern structure was built in the late 1970s. This makes it one of the older and more established schools in the block, with five classrooms, classes up to the higher primary level (7th grade), six teachers and a play area built up over the years. In Village H the government school was the only educational service, with no non-formal schools, ongoing literacy classes or NGO-run education interventions operating locally.

In addition to semi-structured interviews with a small sample of parents in each locality, I spent time with teachers, and other village people who had played a role in developing the schools. The sample comprised parents who had children of school-going age[5], who were selected to represent a diverse occupational and caste background. Interviews were also conducted with administrators of the education department and district-level IAS officers. The findings are presented below.

3 Enrolment in School

The fact that enrolments in rural Indian schools have increased substantially in the last decade would indicate that getting children to school is something parents desire. Enrolments have also been driven by administrative intervention placing pressure on teachers to ensure that school registers reflect high interest in education (Drèze and Sen, 1995). However, pressure to fulfil targets is not the only reason why teachers may play a highly interventionist role. For instance, in village H, the headmaster played a key role in conducting a census in the village to enrol children of the age of six for primary school, which he believed was his duty as laid out in the Compulsory Primary Education Act of 1961. Through his persistent efforts, he claimed that the enrolment had gone up from 13 students in 1984 when he became headmaster to 268 students, the current number of enrolled children. As evidence of his commitment, he had also put up a board outside the school enumerating on a daily basis the enrolment and attendance figures for each class in the school, a highly unusual and public gesture, suggesting a sense of accountability to the community.

All the respondents said that the enrolment of the children had been done by the teachers or the headmaster himself, bearing out the claims of the headmaster. While this suggests that enrolments cannot be taken as an indicator of people's interest in education, as the process of registration is either an act of compulsion or effective persuasion, it does not suggest that parents would **not** have enrolled their children if teachers had not intervened. Parents from Scheduled Caste (SC) and other low-caste and landless households who were themselves non-literate showed an interest in educating their children, and explained their interest as arising out of their own lack of education, which they explained as an outcome of 'ignorance', 'not being intelligent to understand the value of education', 'lack of awareness'. The role of external catalysts was also critical in stimulating their interest. 'Who was there [when I was a child] to advise and compel us like you are doing now?...Now many people come and tell us' said one SC woman. 'People like you come and advise us that I should send my only son to school...that even though I did not learn, at least I should educate him' said a Muslim man. 'Now we feel like educating...Let them (the children) become intelligent...we have become useless' said another woman. External catalysts were not just advocates but also role models. One woman said '[Education] appears good. When I look at people like you or the teacher, it looks fine...I realise that [to be] educated is to be like [you]'.

[5] Primary school generally covers children from ages 6–10.

Given the unreliability of ascertaining the extent of parental interest in education through enrolment figures alone, the extent to which high enrolment rates in the village translates into education attendance patterns is taken up next.

4 Attendance in School

There are two aspects of education attendance which are important for the achievement of UPE: discontinuation of a child's schooling, and irregular attendance. Discontinuation of schooling may be total, or partial, i.e. months at a stretch during the migration season or several weeks at a stretch off during the harvest season. Partial discontinuation often means consequent retention in the same class for 2–3 years for the child; poor intellectual or skills retention; and the possibility of total discontinuation if parents feel that the child is not doing very well. Irregularity in attendance refers to days that are missed randomly for a variety of reasons including sickness, emergency work at home or in the fields, or accompanying parents on short trips away because there is no-one to look after the children. Because days missed by irregular children have the appearance of being randomly scattered during a year, the potential impact is often underestimated although it is often the same as partial discontinuation.

Analysis of school data[6] in Village H indicates strong seasonal variations in school attendance. The school year runs from June–April, and the highest attendance rates are found in the months of July, August, September, January and February. In June, the teachers are busy rounding up students for the school, October finds the school closed for three weeks, and November and December are the harvest months, with average attendance rates about 35–40 per cent. In March, the migration is well underway, and the decline in attendance is again down to about 35 per cent. Although January and February were reported by the headmaster as being relatively good attendance months[7], the notice board outside the school indicated that the average rate was 68 per cent.

School data is useful for capturing the seasonal patterns of school attendance, particularly the periods in which there is partial discontinuation of schooling as children migrate with parents, or work full-time in agriculture. Although an average attendance rate of 68 per cent – 70 per cent for five months of a school year may be quite an achievement by schooling standards in other states of the country – it is still a long way from the goal of universalisation, particularly in a village which has had a functioning school for as long as Village H. However, school data is unable to provide insights into the more pervasive phenomenon of irregular attendance.

Given the difficulty of arriving at the scale of irregular attendance through official records, parents themselves became the best source of information on absenteeism in schools[8]. In Village H I conducted detailed interviews with parents in 15 households[9], and found a mixed pattern of enrolment and attendance for children of school-going age as indicated in the following table:

[6] The veracity of school data cannot however be taken for granted – a teacher in one village school confided that he was under pressure to report good attendance data, not from officials as is often assumed, but from community leaders, who were worried that the ability of the school to access new funds and resources would be adversely affected if officials felt that it was not running effectively.

[7] Overlapping with the fieldwork period.

[8] However, I was still unable to get a sense of how many days in a year irregular children missed. Parents were able to estimate absenteeism only in a very approximate way, although I was able to get a sense of the relative extent of the absenteeism of irregular children from their accounts.

[9] In many with husbands **and** wives, as I was trying to explore if there were gender differences in construction of the value of education, or the reasons why certain decisions were made. This sample was selected with the purpose of understanding differences in the ways parents think and make decisions, rather than to compute statistical significance in decision-making. Two of the households were Muslim households, five Scheduled Caste (SC), three Scheduled Tribe (ST), two Lingayat and two Hadpad (the latter two relatively higher up in the caste ladder, although still classified as 'backward' castes). Occupationally, 12 were marginal or landless households, one was landowning, one government service and one a tailor.

Total Enrolment	**9 households**
Regular attendance	4 households
Irregular attendance	4 households
Drop out	1 households
Partial enrolment	**6 households**
Regular attendance	3 households
Irregular attendance	1 households
Drop out	2 households

Households in which all the children were enrolled and attended regularly were either relatively well-off families, were not involved in agriculture, or the child was the only child of school-going age but had other siblings of the same sex still at home. There were only four households where this was the case. In the remaining 11 households, there were children who were not enrolled, had dropped out, were irregular or regular attendees. The circumstances in which these mixed patterns were found are explored below.

4.1 Factors influencing attendance

A range of factors influenced whether children were regular or not, and which children were likely to be regular or not. Two factors, the participation of children in household and field activities and children's refusal to study, emerged as the main factors that parents cited as explanation for irregularity.

5 Children's Participation in Household Activities

The age and gender composition of the household were significant axes in the allocation of tasks to children, which then influenced parents' decisions on which child to educate, and which child to retain for labour use. Children over the age of ten generally were considered fit to accompany parents as wage labour; if there were boys, they were the first choice, but there were cases where girls also did wage labour if there were no boys of the appropriate age, or if there were economic compulsions. Grazing was done by both girls and boys, though there were two significant factors which influenced the decision: the **type** of livestock being grazed (goats and cows were grazed by girls, but not oxen or buffaloes); and the **distance** of the grazing ground from the house (if it was far away then girls were not sent). Similarly where there was adult female labour in the household to take care of younger children and household chores, then girls were likely to be relatively free to attend school. This generally happened in extended families. However, while girls were considered able to do jobs done by boys, the reverse was not true. Boys did not contribute to domestic chores like looking after siblings, cooking or cleaning, although they did help with the collection of water and fuelwood.

Decisions about which child to send to school were thus often based on calculations of the need and availability of family labour of the appropriate gender and age for the tasks concerned. In one landless household, where three out of four children were enrolled, the two daughters attended school regularly because the mother stayed at home to look after household responsibilities. The enrolled son was irregular, because he also had responsibilities for grazing, particularly when the father, a casual wage labourer was absent for long periods of time. The eldest son, not enrolled, accompanied his father as a wage labourer. The mother's decision to stay at home was prompted by her realisation that the wage rate for women was 'too low, and [my husband] feels that the children may starve to death if I go out to work'.

These findings suggest that for poor households (a) the ability to dedicate a child full-time to education (i.e. regular attendance) is made only when there is labour in the household that can substitute what the child can do, but that the situation is subject to change, making it uncertain how long that child

may be able to study; (b) where the availability of labour involves making more tenuous arrangements, relying perhaps on a much younger child, or a daughter to substitute a son's labour, there is a likelihood that the child's attendance will be irregular. However, the strategies[10] used to manage material constraints were also determined by norms based on gender and age, suggesting that household economic management was shaped by beliefs of what is appropriate and acceptable.

6 Children's Relationship to Schooling

Analyses of education generally tend to assume that the parents are the key decision-makers, and that children tend to comply with parents' wishes. With the recent exception of Nieuwenhuys (1994) whose research centred around the life-worlds of children, most research, including mine, focused on what the parents did and why. However, parents often claimed that despite enrolling children in school, their children refused to go, and that parents are often afraid to force their children. One woman said '..the boy was furious and angry that he had been admitted against his wishes, and protested. If we had proceeded further, who knows what he would have done?' 'Even if we scold and beat him, he does not go. So we were compelled to discontinue him.' said Bassamma, both of whose children had dropped out. A third woman said of her seven year old son:

> He roams with his friends and wastes time. We bought books. We registered his name in school but he does not go. We are serious, but he does not go, what can we do? Whatever effort we made and how much we compelled him, he did not go. We gave him money, we coaxed and cajoled, we praised him and encouraged him, and took him and left him at the school. Then we came back and he used to follow us back here.

When parents were asked how far they wanted their children to study, a common response was 'till whatever level they want to', suggesting that children's own interest in schooling was also a critical factor, not just parental aspiration.

The reasons that parents cited for their child's apparent dislike or lack of interest in school were also varied. Fear of the teacher, particularly related to corporal punishment, was often cited as a reason. However, in a few cases the parents also admitted that the child just ran around playing. Remembering her childhood, one woman said 'Under the pretext that we do not want to go to school to avoid the beatings of the teacher, we used to walk astray here and there.' Understanding what shapes children's motivations and feelings is also important.

The issue of the extent to which parents can exert control over their children's actions and tell them what to do was not just related to school attendance, but in some cases was evident in control over children's labour. Parents often said that they found it hard to persuade children to do household or other work because the children ran away to play with their friends. Interestingly, although all the children whose discontinuation was attributed to disobedience were boys, it was not just boys who were disobedient, or to whom parents appeared to give in. Nagamma's daughters 'refuse to do the work', while Husainsaba explained that his younger daughter had to be pulled out of school because his elder daughter 'refused to do the grazing'. This is not to imply that children were totally autonomous actors. Clearly, the extent to which children's disobedience is tolerated, and the contexts in which tolerance is extended or not, would vary between households, depend on the gender of the child, and on the issue around which there was disobedience. For instance, when I asked Husainsaba whether he would withdraw his son from school if his daughters refused to do other tasks, he looked at me quite scornfully and said 'they [the daughters] dare not say anything.'

The extent to which disobedience is tolerated or even allowed is mediated through the gender of the disobedient child as well as the end-result of the disobedience. Clearly obedience has to be

[10] I use the word 'strategy' here in the way suggested by Lockwood (this volume), referring more to tactics developed to manage uncertainty and changing conditions. However, I would suggest at the same time, that gender ideologies remain harder to negotiate and constitute a core set of issues in decision-making that are relatively inflexible even in times of uncertainty.

negotiated and in some cases results in parents' 'willingness', albeit reluctant, to give in to a child's wishes. It signals the important issue raised by Lockwood (this volume) about the extent to which parents are able to rely on children as a resource, and the extent to which the social management of parent-child relationships is an important variable in assessing education behaviour. To non-literate parents, a child who goes to school can appear to inhabit a different 'life-world' in which they cannot participate. Rangappa's daughter would try to discuss with him what she has learned but as he said 'We are not educated, and so we cannot understand.'

However, children's actions do operate within a broader framework of parental views, which could help to explain why parents may be relatively indulgent about children's actions in some situations and not others. Parents' views on the value and meaning of education are explored next.

7 Parents' Views on the Value of Education

Unravelling conversations on the meaning and value of education, there were three main issues that emerged: the importance of education for employment, particularly government jobs; the development of practical skills (literacy and numeracy) leading to relatively less dependence on other members of the community for reading letters and other documents; and the importance of education in developing the mind and other human qualities. Underlying all of these, however, was also a strong sense of pragmatism which constantly referred back to household economic circumstances.

Immediate responses to the question 'why are you sending your child to school?' were expressed in terms of aspirations for economic improvement. Many parents expressed the desire for their children to become teachers, or get government jobs. An oft-cited story was that of a landless SC man whose educated son went on to become a school teacher, greatly boosting the economic circumstances of his family, and this story had taken on the status of a myth in shaping people's belief in the economic value of education. However, responses around employment, despite being the first thing people articulated, were not deeply entrenched. When respondents were then asked what the employment opportunities were, it often provoked strong views. For SC families, in particular, the capacity to get employed was not just based on merit or education: 'Even if we get chances for some good job, we say that we do not have money to pay deposit, and also tell ourselves that our fate is only to do labour.'

Respondents referred not just to the lack of non-agricultural job opportunities in the area, but also said that government jobs, though desirable, were out of their reach because they needed to pay bribes in order to be considered for them, as the demand for jobs was very high. In one case, however, the parent was educating his children with a very clear employment strategy in mind. He was an educated landowner, one of the unofficial leaders of the village, all of whose children were in school:

> Agriculture is OK. But in these days I feel its good if there is a person with a job in the family. I feel such a family manages smoothly because sometimes there is excess rainfall due to which we incur losses. On the other hand, if there is no rainfall, then also we incur loss. This puts us in a situation where we are compelled to take loans from others. ... And gradually we shrink economically little by little. Instead, if we have an employed person in the house, he earns Rs.1000–3000 salary.

In this case, not only did the parent have his own experience of benefit informing his decision, but he also had the confidence which came from his relative power and economic security which could influence his child's access to salaried employment, despite the economic insecurity that came from being an agriculturist in a drought-prone area.

The difference that relative affluence can make was highlighted by an SC landless woman who exploded:

> Curse be on our birth! When the stomach pinches, who can think of the future? When the stomach is full, one thinks of studying, acquiring knowledge and becoming educated. One desires to do this and then to improve and aspire for a job. When one is eternally hungry, who thinks about job and salary? People who can afford, send [their children to school]. Do

people who cannot afford send? Rich people send. Can people like us afford to send?

While the prospect of future employment was clearly at the back of all parents' minds, their own awareness of their ability to get access to jobs, in terms of both their power and social status, as well as a realistic appraisal of the economic opportunities available, meant that their aspirations were tempered by a pragmatic understanding of what they believed they could get out of educating their children. Getting a job was about 'the future' which could not be predicted; and thus 'fate' would determine what happened to the child. The value of education thus became expressed in terms of the practical skills that parents believed would help children in their future lives:

> If they learn four letters, and further, if their fate is good, they will get a job in the future.

> How do we know about the future? We understand and tell them they will not be dull, need not sign by thumb impression and become intelligent.

> What can I think and plan for him? Madam, we ask him to wake up, ask him to go to school and tell him to become intelligent and careful.[11]

> We have now only thought to get him a little educated and acquire some knowledge to become intelligent. Can we afford economically to continue his studies till he gets a job? At least let him study to be able to sign and that is enough.

> We...sign by thumb-impression. Let them at least write their names.

These quotes suggest that parents believe that sending children to school will enable them to learn at least some useful skills, including numeracy and literacy, even if it does not lead to employment, over which they have no control. On the one hand, this implies that parents have broadly evaluated the benefits and are making clear decisions on that basis. I would suggest however, that expressions which imply evaluation are shaped by the extent of information that parents have about the value of education. One ST woman expressed it clearly 'Not being educated, how do we know the value and worth of education?' she asked. The way in which the value of education is expressed by non-literate parents is often based on their evaluation of the constraints they have experienced on account of being illiterate. While at one level this is self-evident, its influence on parental decisions cannot be underestimated. Parents thus rely on external actors to help make the decision, which may explain the extent to which 'the rhetoric' of the value of education often finds its way into conversations on education, particularly the use of words like 'wise', 'intelligent', 'careful', which parents are often unable to explain.

Interwoven with the material factors shaping education behaviour are the normative factors that also play an important role even if they are not explicitly articulated by parents as central factors in their decisions. Several parents felt that gaining education meant leaving agriculture for good. This reflected both a practical viewpoint as well as a belief that if you got educated you deserved a fate better than that of agriculture and 'breaking your back'. On the practical level, many parents felt that if a person was not trained in agriculture from a young age, they would not be good field workers or agriculturists. This prompted some parents to believe that the only sensible option for children of agricultural households who wished to learn some skills as well as be trained for agriculture was to combine both:

> What kind of agricultural work is known to children who go to school?... If they continue studying as they grow up, they cannot learn fieldwork. On the other hand, studying a little and doing the fieldwork when one is young, it can be learnt. Educated people cannot do work like managing oxen and tilling, erecting fencing

[11] The word 'careful' cropped up many times in the interview, and, because of the connotation of 'worry', is interpreted to mean 'having the capacity to think about the future'. In one tribal hamlet, the educated son of the leader on whose initiative the school was built in his village, said that he felt the main difference between an educated person and an uneducated person was the ability to plan for the future; uneducated people in his community smoked and drank away their money, whereas, being educated, he saved and invested his money in the future of his family.

posts, cooking and feeding. They cannot learn. If one does these works gradually, they can learn.

The combination of the 'practical' and the 'normative' in the above statement is almost inextricable. On the one hand, it suggests a world-view that sees education as somehow alienating people from (or making them too good for) traditional practices and occupations. It may also link in with the distinction that appears to be made by administrators and by the wider world between literate and non-literate people, deeply influencing people's feelings of self-worth. Non-literate people often represented themselves as worthless and socially impoverished, often throwing in statements like 'We are very poor people. We should also be worthy to get educated' into our conversations (see also Yates, this volume). Perceptions of low self-worth could also emerge from experiences of discrimination that structure village life, particularly caste-based exclusion. Most old village schools in the area were originally run in temples, into which SC people were, and still are, denied entry[12]. and this meant that for the first 20 years of Village H's school history, SC children were not permitted to study. Even after the first cement school building was constructed, the discrimination continued. A former student of the school recalled 'In those days, in school, upper-caste children would sit on one side and SC children on one side separately. When I was studying in 1968 there was a Brahmin teacher. He would not touch us. He was not critical about low-castes [attending school], but he pretended not to notice us. In total, he did not care.' Although respondents in my sample did not overtly link self-worth with their caste status, for parents, memories of such experiences would certainly have contributed to their perceptions of identity and worth, including their economic identity, shaping their view of what was possible and likely in terms of long-term change.

These findings suggest that the management of household material circumstances reflected the merging of options that were about both real and perceived constraints. Clearly, while education was valued on the whole by parents, the management of children's education was based on short- to medium-term material considerations, as well as broader views about what and how it was that education could contribute to household security in the long-term. However, even here, the gender of the child was a significant factor. Though parents did not explicitly exclude girls from their conversations on the economic benefits of education, girls were clearly irrelevant to the discussion. Child marriage being the norm, it was clear that girls would not be educated beyond primary school leaving them ill-equipped to compete for formal employment opportunities. In other words, the 'economic bottom line' was made up as much by existing material constraints and an appraisal of economic prospects, as by parents' experiences and information about the outcomes of education which were in turn gendered, their belief in their own worth in getting education, the social distance between non-literate, poor and low-caste parents on the one hand, and administrators and teachers on the other, and parent-child relationships.

8 Gender and Social Risk: Parents' Views on Educating Girls

The last section indicates a certain amount of fluidity in parental decisions to educate boys or girls; girls were sent to school, in some cases rather than boys, were sometimes as rebellious or disobedient as boys, and the gender division of labour was rigid when it came to boys not being allowed to do girls' work, but did not restrict girls from being considered for boys' work within certain limits of propriety and acceptability. Girls and boys played together freely both at school and outside, and parents did not object to co-education for primary school children. However, the education of girls was a secondary consideration, a by-product of household circumstances, not a factor shaping it, and this was evident in the way parents spoke of the different 'fates' that awaited boys and girls. Girls are generally married on attainment of puberty or soon thereafter, and both boys and girls are generally

[12] While in present times barring Scheduled Caste people from entering temples is unlawful, there is still an unwritten but observed ban in most villages, often upheld by Scheduled Caste families themselves. In a neighbouring village, a teacher explained that the unofficial ban on Scheduled Caste people entering temples was collectively upheld. 'That is the tradition of the village. They [SC people] cannot go [into the temples] and sit, and they have a great fear about God. They are scared that 'if we touch then God will curse us'

betrothed at a very young age. All parents interviewed reported that if they educated their girls at all, it would be permitted only up until puberty. The availability of a functioning school in the village meant that parents could, and often did, educate their daughters up until puberty. There was only one household interviewed where the father made it clear that educating girls was not possible: 'That proposal [educating daughters] cannot work here. ... how can housework be done, and who will do it? We have to be fed. Then cattle have to be looked after and grazed... we have to think of everything. Now we have cattle. What about them?'

Most households were open to educating girls, as they believed that the acquisition of skills would benefit children in general. However, the cut-off point of puberty was considered non-negotiable. The reason for this was mentioned variably in terms of security concerns for 'grown-up' girls, difficulties in finding husbands once girls were beyond puberty, and the general 'impropriety' of having daughters in school after puberty. One articulate woman, a tailor, who though non-literate herself was married to a barber with 10 years' education, explained the situation: 'Village people won't change. They are afraid that the girls are matured, because in future there may be trouble. So as and when a suitor comes, they get them married.

Another woman said: 'For girls, we stop education as soon as they grow up. Men scold us as to why educate the girls, if we continue further...they scold saying that they may find difficulty in finding boys for marriage. They agree to educate girls only up to the time when they grow up.'

While both women and men said that puberty was the cut-off point, women were forthcoming when asked if that was at all negotiable, and if not, why not. One woman said: 'Who wants to bear the blame? If she talks normally with any man, she is accused unnecessarily that she is flirting, and they make up such stories. In the present times, which are sensitive, let any man come [forward for marriage]. We feel that we should unburden our responsibility as soon as a good man arrives'.

When asked why girls could not resume studies after marriage, one woman responded that such a move would entail 'facing a hostile society'. Clearly the costs of taking on social norms that are, from the perspective of people in the village, cast in stone, is very high, given that early age of marriage is a widespread community norm. The few girls who were studying beyond the seventh year were being educated outside the village, staying with relatives in bigger villages or in the block headquarters. They came from families where the one of the parents was educated, or families which were relatively wealthy, suggesting that ideological norms are more easily negotiated if you are either relatively more prosperous or have more education. The decision to withdraw girls from school is influenced by the underlying belief that girls are ultimately destined to belong to another family: 'Leave girls...they go to the husbandís house. Boys alone can care for us. So we wish that he should become well-educated.'

The end-result of educating girls and boys is clearly believed to be different. Girls are destined to leave, boys to stay. While this does not translate into total education discrimination in favour of boys, it does have a bearing on the extent of adjustment that a household is willing to make in order to send girls to school. Parents were aware that sending girls to school beyond a certain age would provoke social hostility and believed that it is 'unsafe' for girls to move around freely after puberty, especially if they are unmarried. Decisions around educating girls therefore were based on an evaluation of social risk rather than a decision to manage uncertain economic conditions.

9 Conclusion: Some Implications for Policy and Implementation

The starting point for the discussion in this paper was a concern with the nature and design of education programmes. The questions underpinning this research are: Are strategies that ignore localised understandings likely to succeed? If the complexity involved in Village H mentioned above were to inform the design of an education programme, how would it look? Based on the findings in Village H, which indicate that educational behaviour of poor parents is influenced by a range of factors which relate to the management of economic uncertainty and the evaluation of social risk, I suggest a few areas of intervention that would have to be either re-thought or addressed.

Firstly, how can an education intervention function in a situation of economic uncertainty? Apart from the obvious need for greater inter-sectoral coordination of development interventions, it raises broader issues about how schools should be run in terms of timing, content and approach. Does a rigid daytime schedule of classes impede the participation of children? Should the content be a combination of text and practical skills? Should the approach not be an evolutionary, creative learning approach that develops people's confidence rather than working through a fixed curriculum that further divides literate and non-literate people, devaluing the latter? These are not new questions, but remain a challenge in the design and management of education programmes.

Secondly, and at a more practical level, is the need to make institutional arrangements for the care and management of children. In a context of seasonal out-migration, parents have little choice but to take children with them. One of the women said 'If [children] were looked after and cared for like their mothers [do], we would leave them behind.' The welfare of children is clearly an important factor for parents, an important reminder not to view children purely as instruments of parental aspirations.

Administrators interviewed in the course of the research often expressed the view that all they could do was create the infrastructure and 'convince' people of the importance of education. Their perception of the relatively low response to educational availability was that parents were ignorant or lacked awareness. The administrative response to what are considered 'demand-side' issues has been to institute community-based organisations to strengthen the local management of schools. These bodies are often controlled by people who have dominated village institutions for a long time. Rather than stimulating public action, they have the effect of suppressing the participation of poorer households, by perpetuating social distance. At present, administrators are content with 'passing the buck' onto community organisations, under the pretext of decentralised planning. Developing mechanisms to ensure that both states and communities take on responsibilities for ensuring that poorer households get the benefits of education which they do desire is the challenge yet to be met.

Lastly, tackling the structures that foster the perception of 'social risk' that prevents girls in particular from participating in education processes is critical. The innovative approach evolved by an education programme, Mahila Samakhya, working in seven states of the country, has shown how education itself can play a role in this process, through the expansion of the meaning of education to include a conscientising approach, working through parents, exploring new options on both economic and social fronts, building community-level organisations for low-caste women, and offering a menu of educational interventions. Lessons from this process will prove invaluable for the future.

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